

Pull out grass, not your hair, over Calif. drought, homeowners told

By The Sacramento Bee, adapted by Newsela staff

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An entire block of homes has lush green grass lawns in El Dorado Hills, Calif., as seen March 27, 2014.

SACRAMENTO, Calif.—California’s capital city has hot, dry summers and gets little annual rainfall. Yet, the city’s lawns are supposed to look like lush lawns in rain-soaked England.

Sacramento has a long history of green lawns. That may be starting to change, however. With a lack of rainfall, local governments are worried about having too little water. California is in a drought. In January, Gov. Jerry Brown declared a state of emergency because of it.

So cities in California are nudging home builders to replace grass with low-water plants that more naturally suit California.

A growing number of cities are even paying homeowners to tear out their lawns.

Beauty And Benefits

And a few home builders are planning housing projects with less grass. Instead, they’ll put in plants that make more sense for California’s regular droughts.

“We’re on the cusp of change,” said Kevin Carson. He is a boss at The New Home Co., a company that builds large groups of homes, called developments.

The developer is building the first major housing development in decades in the town of Davis, Calif.

City officials in Davis insisted on the plan. The project will feature drought-tolerant plants along its bike paths. Most front yards will be landscaped with low-water plants in place of grass. They’re planning gardens of lavender, wild roses and brush, Carson said.

A big unknown is whether buyers will want homes without lawns. Carson and others said it’s a matter of showing homeowners the beauty and benefits of low-water plants.

“We have to give them some different opportunities,” Carson said.

Today, there’s basically one way most people think of to landscape a house: a lawn surrounded by shrubs and flowers with a shade tree or two. It’s known as the English garden and now it’s nearly everywhere. But that wasn’t always the case, experts said.

The lawn took hold in the mid-1800s. Seed companies sold the idea to homeowners, said Thomas J. Mickey, author of “America’s Romance with the English Garden.”

“Seed companies had a huge influence on California landscapes,” he said.

The Perfect Lawn

Salesmen went west to promote yards and sell grass seeds, Mickey said.

People moving from the East Coast also brought their ideas of landscaping with them to the West. The emerging middle class wanted lawns just like the upper class.

A well-groomed front lawn became a symbol of wealth.

“It really took off when people had the money to move to the suburbs,” Mickey said. “Real estate agents would say, Now you can have a lawn.”

The federal government, too, promoted lawns to homeowners. In its yearbook from 1897, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) described the ideal turf.

“A perfect lawn consists of the growth of a single variety of grass with a smooth, even surface,” wrote the USDA.

Homeowners took the advice to heart, competing to have the perfect lawn. Today they spend billions of dollars on their lawns.

Cities throughout California now require homeowners to cut water use by 20 percent or more.

California's towns and cities are also exploring alternatives to encourage fewer lawns. For instance, Sacramento started a program that pays people to switch from grass to plants that use less water.

Saving On Water

Roseville, Calif., launched its own cash-for-grass program in 2008.

"We had a line outside the door the morning we started," said Lisa Brown, who runs Roseville's water-conservation program.

The program pays homeowners to replace lawns with drought-tolerant plants.

An average size lawn needs 45,653 gallons of water per year, Brown estimated. The same size area needs only 12,338 gallons of water a year if it has low-water plants, she said.

Since the program began, at least 500 homeowners have signed up. The change saves an estimated 14 million gallons of water annually, Brown said.

Britta Kalinowski joined the program in 2009. Her front yard was once flat turf, but now it's a mix of rosemary and lavender, periwinkle and crape myrtle, with a variety of height and color.

Instead of mowing once a week she trims her plants a couple of times a year and sometimes replaces a plant or two, Kalinowski said.

"I'm really happy with it," she said. "It looks more interesting. Some of our neighbors are ripping their hair out because they can't keep their lawns green. They water and they fertilize. I don't have that trouble."